

'Long neglected by Congress, oceans' health sinking to new depths'

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Our oceans are like the foundation of a house: often overlooked but integral to our livelihood. More than half of the U.S. population lives in coastal counties, which make up a quarter of America's landmass.

Yet an agonizingly small amount of congressional attention is devoted to our oceans.

We have a long history of ocean management. This year we celebrate the 200th birthday of the U.S. Coast and Geodetic Survey, an organization christened by Thomas Jefferson and the predecessor to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

But our youngest piece of major ocean legislation is more than 30 years old: the Magnuson-Stevens Fisheries Conservation and Management Act. This law is valuable, but it's only one piece of the puzzle.

A major problem is the lack of a system that can address and adapt to regional differences. Our ocean ecosystems are not homogenous. To submit the tidal salt marshes of New Jersey to the same slate of laws as the shallow undersea plateaus of Maine is madness. To treat Washington's Puget Sound, Maryland's Chesapeake Bay and California's Monterey Bay by the same set of rules is to suggest that farmland in the Plains and the swamps of the Everglades are cousins.

Last month, the worst red tide on record occurred off the California coast. These blooms of toxic algae are also increasingly common off the coast of Florida and in the Gulf of Mexico. They poison marine life, disrupt fisheries and discourage beachgoers. As a result of the California bloom, shellfish in the region will be too toxic to eat until October.

Our coasts and shores also suffer. Each year, Louisiana loses 25 to 35 square miles of wetlands, which help protect coastal regions from flooding. Scientists say the Katrina storm surge was 20 percent higher because these wetlands were gone. Our oceans even contribute to regulating the Earth's temperature, helping distribute heat around the world.

For two centuries we have approached ocean governance with a patchwork of overlapping laws, competing agencies and conflicting goals. But we must confront problems of pollution, beach erosion, disruptive development and overfishing. It's long overdue for Congress and the president to recognize the need for a comprehensive approach to caring for our seas.

The moment couldn't be better for a concerted push on ocean legislation. Washington just wrapped up its annual Capitol Hill Oceans Week. The event has grown since its inception in 2001. This year, almost 100 members of Congress took advantage of the gathering of representatives from federal and state governments, industry leaders, academics and nonprofit groups. Personalities including Sylvia Earle, National Geographic explorer in residence, and Jean-Michel Cousteau, son of Jacques Cousteau, added their expertise to the event.

But talking can only get us so far. Action is needed. Luckily, there are many people who have dedicated their lives to preserving this great national treasure, and they're more than willing to help Congress and the president come up with the best ways to save our oceans. The best solutions always come from those with the most invested in the situation.

Numerous pieces of legislation beg for consideration, ranging from local protection initiatives to national ocean policy. The National Integrated Coastal and Ocean Observing System Act would create a national integrated ocean observing, monitoring and forecasting system, while the National Ocean Exploration Program Act would establish a pair of programs focusing on investigating the ocean, our final frontier. Another act, Oceans 21, is more comprehensive, establishing a national oceans policy that focuses on regional- and ecosystem-based models of governance. Congress owes it to the country to carefully weigh these proposals.

As we celebrate National Oceans Month throughout June, these initiatives are just a few of the many important ideas being discussed in Congress. These are laws that would help ensure the protection, conservation and health of our oceans for generations to come.

(Reps. Allen, Farr, Gilchrest, Inslee and Saxton are co-chairs of the House Oceans Caucus.)